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ON PAGE A-1

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U.S. OFFICIALS SEE A BULGARIAN 'LINK'

But They Say Tie to Agca May Not Have Involved Pope

The following article is based on reporting by Philip Taubman and Leslie H. Gelb and was written by Mr. Taubman.

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 26 — American officials familiar with developments in the Italian investigation of the shooting of Pope John Paul II say there is convincing evidence that the Pope's assailant spent time in Bulgaria, and that he associated with several Bulgarians in Rome before the assassination attempt in May 1981.

The officials said, however, that it had not been proved that the relationship between Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turk convicted of shooting the Pope, and Bulgarians had anything to do with the shooting.

They said that most of the information reaching Washington through intelligence channels had come from the Italian Government and much of it, in turn, was based on statements made by Mr. Agca after his conviction, some confirmed and others not.

United States intelligence agencies are watching developments in the case closely, according to senior Reagan Administration officials, and are relying primarily on information provided by European governments rather than conducting a separate American investigation.

"It is an Italian matter and it would be inappropriate for the United States to interfere," a senior intelligence official said.

The Reagan Administration, which in the past has been quick to attack what it perceives as Soviet misconduct abroad, has adopted a wait-and-see attitude about speculation that Bulgaria and the Soviet Union were involved in the assassination attempt.

Senior Administration officials attribute the cautious posture to several factors, including a lack of firm evidence and a desire to avoid increasing East-West tensions.

The State Department today dismissed charges that the Government had tried to discourage journalists from investigating possible Bulgarian and Soviet involvement. "We are very con-

cerned about these reports," a department statement said. "It is certainly not United States policy to discourage journalists or the Italian authorities from investigating this case."

The Evidence of Links

American officials familiar with the evidence of links between Mr. Agca and Bulgaria say he spent time in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, in 1980, although exactly how long and for what purpose are not known.

Mr. Agca, who has told the Italian authorities that he received help before the shooting of the Pope from three Bulgarians living in Rome, picked out photographs of several Bulgarians from among dozens of mug shots, the American officials said.

They reported that Mr. Agca also accurately described the apartment one of the men occupied while in Rome. They said Italian investigators searched the apartment late last year and confirmed Mr. Agca's description.

But the nature of his connection with the Bulgarians remains unclear. He told Italian investigators that the three Bulgarians helped him plot the assassination attempt, but as far as American sources know, the Italian Government has been unable to confirm this.

One of the Bulgarians specified by Mr. Agca, Sergei I. Antonov, the head of the Bulgarian national airline office in Rome, was arrested by the Italian authorities in November and is being held on suspicion of complicity in the shooting.

The two other Bulgarians mentioned by Mr. Agca, Todor S. Aivasov, until recently the chief accountant of the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome, and Maj. Zhelyo K. Vasilev, who also worked in the embassy, are in Bulgaria. Both have denied any involvement in the shooting.

Charge by Union Leader

The United States has learned from the Italian authorities that Luigi Scricciolo, an Italian union leader accused of spying for Bulgaria, said the three Bulgarians were intelligence operatives.

The Central Intelligence Agency, however, has no independent verification that the men were associated with the Bulgarian secret service, American officials said, and a senior Italian Government official recently said that the Italian authorities had no evidence of such a connection.

Intelligence analysts are working on two theories to explain the Agca-Bulgarian connection, which may date from 1979.

One theory is that the Bulgarian secret service hired Mr. Agca either as an assassin or drug-trade enforcer in an arrangement that had nothing to do with the Pope or the Soviet Union. American officials said that the Bulgarian secret service was heavily involved in illegal drug trafficking in Europe and Turkey.

According to this theory, the Bulgarians were not aware that in 1979 Mr. Agca, after escaping from a Turkish prison where he was serving a sentence for killing a Turkish newspaper editor, had threatened to kill the Pope when he toured Turkey. Later, this theory goes, when Mr. Agca found himself in Rome on a mission for the Bulgarian secret service, he independently plotted to kill the Pope, without the support or knowledge of the Bulgarian authorities.

The Second Theory

The other theory is that Moscow, concerned about support Pope John Paul II, a Pole, might give to the Solidarity union movement in Poland, asked the Bulgarian secret service in 1979 to find someone who could someday assassinate the Pope.

American intelligence officials said that in 1980 and 1981, when Solidarity's influence in Poland was increasing, the Vatican communicated with Solidarity leaders frequently and gave it advice and other assistance.

American officials ruled out the possibility that Mr. Agca's connections with Bulgaria were completely innocent. They said that because of tight security in Bulgaria, it was highly improbable that Bulgarian authorities were unaware either of Mr. Agca's presence in Sofia in 1980 or of his background as a convicted murderer.

Administration officials expressed confidence in the judgment and abilities of Judge Ilario Martella, the Italian magistrate who is investigating the case. Several intelligence officials said Mr. Martella had a reputation as an independent, nonpolitical jurist.

Much of the Administration's judgment about the case is based on confidence in Judge Martella. Officials said his pursuit of the case, specifically the Bulgarian connection, indicated that Mr. Agca's claims of Bulgarian involvement should not be dismissed.

The C.I.A., according to senior intelligence officials, remains skeptical about Bulgarian involvement.

The Case for American Restraint

The Italian Government has urged the United States to use caution in speaking publicly about this matter. At the same time, Administration officials acknowledged that they had their own reasons for restraint. One reason, they said, is growing White House interest in a possible summit meeting between President Reagan and Yuri V. Andropov, the Soviet party leader.

Officials said there was an understanding in the Administration not to poison the air with charges that might prevent such a meeting and that might not be substantiated later.

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Several former Government officials, including Henry A. Kissinger, Secretary of State in the Nixon and Ford Administrations, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to President Carter, have said they believe that Bulgaria and the Soviet Union were involved in the assassination attempt.

Support for this theory has come from Paul B. Henze, a former C.I.A. station chief in Turkey and an aide to Mr. Brzezinski. Mr. Henze, now a consultant to the Rand Corporation, was hired by Reader's Digest after the shooting of the Pope to investigate Mr. Agca's background.

Mr. Henze's findings, which included information about links between Mr. Agca and Bulgaria as well as the Soviet Union's use of Bulgaria as a surrogate to spread unrest in Turkey, were incorporated in a Reader's Digest article on

the shooting of the Pope that was written by Claire Sterling and published last September.

Mr. Henze said he later sold his reports to NBC News and Newsweek, which have explored possible Bulgarian and Soviet involvement. Mr. Henze made this research material available to The New York Times for a fee.